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Tales of India

TALES OF THE HEROINES OF INDIA

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12 MAR 1931
MADRAS

Tales of the Heroines of India

RANI SAMYUKTHA

In the twelfth century Anangapal, a Kshattriya king, ruled in Delhi as the sovereign lord of Hindustan. He had no sons, and his two daughters had married two brave Rajput chieftains, one belonging to the Rahtor clan, ruling in Kanouj, and the other a Chauhan, ruling in Ajmere. As Anangapal had no sons to inherit his throne, the succession depended on his choice. His two daughters both had sons, Jayachandra and Prithvi Raj. Jayachandra was the son of the first daughter and was a few years older than Prithvi. He therefore took it for granted that the Imperial diadem would ultimately be set upon his brow. Contrary to his expectations, however, Anangapal decreed that Prithvi Raj should become Emperor of Delhi when he himself had ceased to reign. The choice of Prithvi was a good one, for he possessed all the kingly qualities. His noble bearing, courage, and suavity of manner had naturally conquered the affection of the Emperor, and when Anangapal died, Prithvi Raj duly ascended the throne.

When Jayachandra received the news of Prithvi Raj's accession, his anger knew no bounds. He had never expected to be passed over in this fashion. He had all along been confident that it

would be his destiny, as the elder of the two cousins, to ascend the Imperial throne and receive the homage of hundreds of tributary chieftains. Now all his dreams vanished away, and he burned with resentment towards Prithvi Raj, who, in his view, had robbed him of the crown to which he was the rightful heir. He swore to take revenge upon the Chauhan chief, and only awaited the opportunity to rise in arms against him.

The rivalry of the two great Hindu chieftains shattered the unity of Hindustan. Just at that time, Shahabuddin Mahomed Ghori, a man of high ambition, was ruling at Ghori in the north-west of India. Like his predecessor, Mahmud of Ghazni, he cherished the hope of invading India and carrying off much booty, and perhaps making himself master of the country. Hitherto the renowned valour of the Rajputs had deterred him from his enterprise; but when he heard of the enmity between the two great houses, the Rahtor and the Chauhan, he felt that all the conditions were in his favour. Gathering together a mighty host, he crossed the Indus and reached the plains of Thaneswar.

Ghori's invasion roused the whole of Hindustan. All the Rajput heroes with their feudal armies joined the standard of Prithvi Raj. The fear that Hinduism was in danger inspired them all with the resolve to strike a blow for their religion. Prithvi Raj, though young, was already famous for his courage and ability, and he was

appointed leader of the Hindu army. Under his command they marched to Thaneswar to repel the attack of Ghori. Jayachandra alone stood aloof. His jealousy of Prithvi Raj was so great that he could not bring himself to join the Hindu host which was led by his kinsman and rival.

The battle of Thaneswar between the Hindus and the followers of Ghori lasted a whole day. Each side displayed great valour, and both armies suffered frightful losses. Neither the Pathans nor the Rajputs would give way. For a long time the result was doubtful, the Pathans fighting desperately, for Ghori had determined to win Hindustan at any cost, and the Rajputs showing equal valour in defence of their country and their faith. At last, when the sun went down and darkness set in, the struggle came to a close. Victory attended the Rajput arms, and Ghori and his men were driven from the battlefield.

The news of the victory filled the whole of India with joy. Jayachandra alone felt gloomy, not because the Hindus had won, but because their success redounded to the glory of Prithvi Raj. He grew still more sore of heart when he heard every bard singing the praises of Prithvi Raj, and every citizen talking of his valour and greatness. Jayachandra's anger was increased when his own daughter, Princess Samyuktha, rejoiced with the rest and rewarded the messenger who brought the news of the victory with a pearl necklace.

Samyuktha was the only daughter of Jayachandra, king of Kanouj. She combined in herself all the graces of womanhood. Her beauty has been immortalized by Chand, the court poet of Prithvi Raj. She had already been greatly attracted by her kinsman, whose gallant and noble demeanour could not fail to appeal to any maiden. His success at Thaneswar caused her to treasure his image in her heart. She found her chief pleasure in thinking of him, gazing at his picture, and talking of him. His prowess was the only theme upon which she cared to dwell. Jayachandra, of course, did everything to discourage his daughter's enthusiasm, and was eager to put an end to what he took for a mere infatuation. As she was now of marriageable age, he resolved to find her a husband. According to the Rajput custom, he announced his daughter's *Swayamvara*—the ceremony in which a royal maiden selects her husband from among the princes present, by placing a garland round his neck—and invited all the princes of Hindustan to attend it. Prithvi Raj alone was not invited, and in order to make this insult still more evident, Jayachandra caused a dwarfish earthen statue of Prithvi Raj to be made and placed at the entrance of the *Swayamvara* hall as a doorkeeper. This was, of course, a most ignoble posture in which to represent a reigning prince.

On hearing of this studied insult offered to Prithvi Raj, Princess Samyuktha felt grieved and

mortified. Without Prithvi Raj the *Swayamvara* would have no interest for her, for she had dedicated herself to the brave prince, body and soul. Meanwhile Jayachandra, quite unaware how deep-rooted was his daughter's passion, still believed it to be no more than a passing fancy. If she chose a prince at the *Swayamvara*, that, he thought, would be the end of her devotion to Prithvi Raj.

The *Swayamvara* day was drawing nigh. All the princes and nobles were arriving at Kanouj, and taking up their abode in the various mansions assigned to them. Samyuktha's heart was beating. Would she, a Rajput lady, discard the man she had chosen and quietly yield to her father's will? Never! She thought to herself, 'My love for Prithvi Raj is no more fancy. It is not a fleeting passion. It is a steadfast and noble love which has already created an indissoluble bond between us. Body and soul, I belong to Prithvi Raj. To choose any other prince for my partner in life, or even to frame such a thought, would be a sin. I swear I will marry Prithvi Raj and none other, or end my wretched life.' As a last resource she resolved to send a messenger to the Chauhan prince, even as Princess Rukmini did to Lord Krishna, revealing her love and telling him that, unless he came to her succour and carried her away, she would despair and die.

A few minutes after she had formed this resolution, she sent for a trustworthy messenger,

gave him the letter she had written, and told him to ride quickly to Rai Pithora, the palace of Prithvi Raj, deliver the letter to him, and bring back a reply. The messenger rode post haste, entered the gorgeous palace, and begged for an immediate interview with the Emperor. When he was summoned to the presence of Prithvi Raj, the messenger bowed and delivered the letter. Prithvi Raj read and re-read every line of Samyuktha's message. Tears shone in his eyes as he learnt how the Princess of Kanouj was pining for him, and what a fatal step she proposed to take if he did not succour her. He hastily penned a note, bidding her not to lose heart and assuring her that he would not fail her.

Then, dismissing the messenger, Prithvi Raj mounted the fleetest of his horses and with a few hundred picked followers, left Delhi for Kanouj. When the setting sun shed its crimson glow over the western horizon the brave Rajputs entered Kanouj. Disguised as mere travellers, they effected their entrance into the city and halted near the *Swayamvara* hall.

The morning of the fateful day dawned. Crowds of people with no thought for anything but the *Swayamvara* gathered in the streets of the city. Even children abandoned all their games and frolics and lingered near the hall. All the streets and houses were gaily decorated with flags and festoons, and the *Swayamvara* hall itself presented a spectacle of the utmost

splendour. The magnificence of the scene beggared description.

All the princes assembled there at the appointed hour, each taking the seat allotted to him. They had all done their utmost to excel one another in beauty of person and richness of attire, for every one of them was eager to be the suitor chosen by the beautiful princess. At last, accompanied by musicians and numbers of female attendants, Princess Samyuktha entered the hall, her natural beauty enhanced by her sumptuous robes and dazzling ornaments. All the guests gazed breathlessly upon her as she walked slowly from prince to prince, holding a garland in her hand. Her principal lady-in-waiting introduced each prince to her, dwelling upon the extent of his kingdom, his famous exploits, and his ancient lineage. Each prince, when Samyuktha halted before him, sat motionless, his heart throbbing with the hope that her garland might be placed around his neck. But Samyuktha, with a fixed smile upon her countenance, went from one prince to the other without any sign of preference until at last she had passed them all in review. Her choice had not fallen on anyone in all that gorgeous assembly.

To Jayachandra as well as to the suitors, Samyuktha's conduct was completely baffling. No one could understand what it signified. But all at once the princess turned towards the

RANI SAMYUKTHA

A young warrior placed Samyuktha on his horse and galloped away.

entrance of the hall and her eyes rested on the image representing Prithvi Raj as a doorkeeper. With a sudden passionate movement she bounded towards it, and placed the garland round the earthen statue's neck. At the same instant a young warrior plunged through the crowd on horseback, and in the twinkling of an eye had raised Samyuktha in his arms, placed her on his horse, and galloped away with a band of comrades behind him. The daring newcomer, who was no other than Prithvi Raj, was pursued by the warriors of Kanouj, but the Chauhan chief's brave companions made a heroic stand and repelled the attack at the cost of their lives. Meanwhile Prithvi Raj and Samyuktha reached Delhi in safety.

For a full year, Prithvi Raj and Samyuktha enjoyed almost more than mortal happiness. When they were parted each moment seemed like a year. But this blissful period of their lives was destined to be but brief. Jayachandra's jealousy of Prithvi Raj had not subsided; indeed he hated him still more, now that he had carried off his daughter. Blinded by hatred and malice, Jayachandra was base enough to invite Mahomed Ghori to invade India a second time and win the empire of Delhi with the help of Kanouj. Mahomed Ghori rejoiced to hear of the existence of such dissension among the Rajputs, for he was sure that, with the aid of Jayachandra, his schemes of conquest were bound to succeed.

Early next year the Pathan horde reached the plains of Thaneswar once again. Jayachandra with his Rajput army arrived at the Pathan camp, and was warmly welcomed by Ghori. Both Prithvi Raj and Samyuktha were horrified to find that a Rajput had joined the Pathans and thus proved a traitor to his country. Samyuktha would not hold back her lord from the conflict to which duty called him. She helped him to put on his armour and weapons, and bade him farewell, saying, 'My noble lord, if God gives you victory this day, the Hindu empire is saved, and posterity will honour you for ever. If you die fighting for your country and religion, then we two shall meet again ere long in the *Veeraswarga*, where you will be given the foremost place, while in this mortal world also your name will stand for ages as the symbol of loyalty and heroism.'

The rest of the tragic tale is soon told. The second battle of Thaneswar was fought. Words cannot express the valour shown by Prithvi Raj on that dreadful day until, overpowered by numbers and covered with mortal wounds, he fell dead upon the field. When Samyuktha heard of her husband's heroic end, she performed the last rites, and, leaping into the fire with a smile upon her lips, she went to join her lord once more in the *Veeraswarga*.

RANI PADMINI.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century the young prince Lakshman Singh was lord of Mewar in Rajputana, the land of heroes. As the prince was too young to rule his kingdom, Rana Bhim Singh, his uncle, carried on the administration. The capital of Mewar was Chitor, the ruins of which still speak of its ancient glories. Bhim Singh had wedded the beautiful Padmini, the daughter of Amara Singh Chauhan of Ceylon. The name of Padmini had been given her because of her wondrous loveliness, which was that of a lotus in full bloom. The bards of the period tell us that no words could express her beauty both of person and of character. Her eyes shone like stars, her skin was as soft as a rose, her teeth were like pearls, and her lips were as red as coral. Her step was light, and she moved as gracefully as a swan glides over the waters of a lake. She was as good, kind-hearted, and generous as she was lovely to look upon.

At that time Sultan Allauddin Khilji was reigning in Delhi. He heard of the beauty of Padmini and was fired with the desire to make her his own. Her image was before his eyes throughout many a sleepless night. Whether he was in his palace, out hunting, or on the battlefield, his one thought was how he might obtain

possession of the peerless Padmini. At last he resolved to besiege Chitor, force it to surrender, and take the Princess captive to his palace. No sooner had he taken this decision than he put it into execution. The siege, however, dragged on a long time, and he was still far from making himself master of Chitor, for the heroic Rajputs fought to the last and would not surrender. Honour was more important to them than life; they would rather die facing the foe than surrender their adorable Princess, the precious jewel of the Rajput kingdom.

At last, when Allauddin realized the futility of his efforts, he changed his plans and sent a message to Bhim Singh asking if he might at least be permitted to look upon the celebrated beauty. He even accepted the condition that he should only behold her reflection in a mirror, as strangers were forbidden to see the Rajput women. Rana Bhim Singh, who was generous by nature, acceded to his foe's request, and Allauddin entered the fortress of Chitor, with only a few followers as his escort, and gazed for a few seconds on the reflection of the beautiful Princess Padmini. Then, thanking the Rana profusely for the honour done to him, Allauddin prepared to return to his camp. The Rana, according to the custom of the Hindus, followed the Sultan to the limits of the fortress, and all the way his guest was expatiating on the courtesy and generosity shown him by the Rana, and professing the

sincerest gratitude. The Rana, replying in a fitting manner, accompanied Allauddin without suspecting any treachery on the part of the latter. But suddenly, at a signal from the Sultan, a group of his men, who were lying in ambush close by, surrounded the Rana and made him prisoner.

The Rana drew his sword to defend himself, but was soon overpowered and taken away to the Tartar camp. Thus did Allauddin reward the hospitality which had been accorded him. Ingratitude is one of the basest of vices, but he brought this eternal disgrace upon himself, so blind was his longing to possess Padmini at all costs.

When the sorrowful tidings spread, all Chitor was overwhelmed with grief. Despair filled every heart, and Padmini's anguish knew no bounds. Before long a message came from the Sultan to the Princess to the effect that, if she desired to secure her husband's liberation, she must surrender herself as hostage to his captor.

Padmini was of true Rajput blood, and when she received this insolent message her anger could scarcely be restrained. But she was as intelligent as she was beautiful, and she set her wits to work to defeat the Sultan's plans. At last she summoned her uncle Gorah and his nephew Badul, and after much discussion they devised a scheme which would restore his freedom to the Rana without hazarding the life or honour of Padmini.

Padmini then sent a reply to Allauddin expressing her willingness to come to his camp as a hostage for her husband, provided she was allowed to go to Delhi in a manner befitting her position as a Princess, followed by all her attendant maidens of noble rank. She also demanded that strict orders should be issued to prevent any curious persons from intruding upon their privacy.

When Allauddin received the message, his joy was boundless, and he thought himself very fortunate that Padmini should so easily have fallen into his snare. He had expected her to make many more difficult stipulations before she placed herself in his power. Accordingly he replied that he would be glad to allow her to go to Delhi with all the state proper to her station in life, and would secure herself and her followers against all molestation. On receiving this assurance, Padmini issued orders for seven hundred litters, richly decorated and provided with heavy curtains, to be made ready for the journey. Each litter held one of the bravest of the warriors of Chitor, borne by six armed soldiers disguised as litter-bearers. Padmini herself remained in the palace eagerly awaiting the issue of her stratagem.

When Allauddin saw the great procession slowly advancing, his heart was filled with savage joy, and he waited eagerly for the arrival of Padmini within his tent. Soon the palanquins

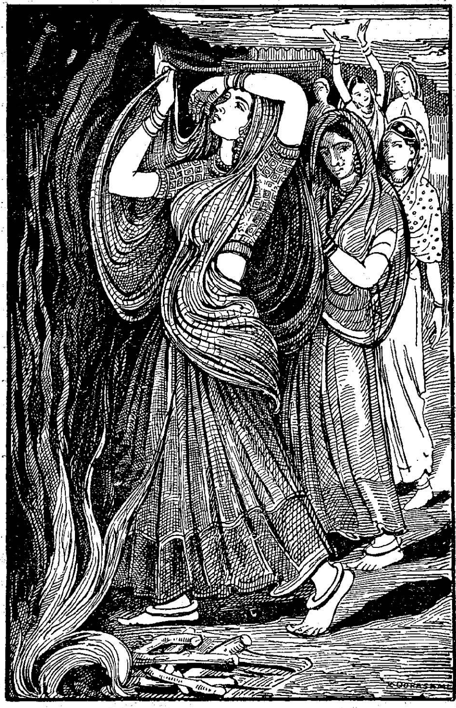
came to halt outside. When Allauddin enquired the reason for the delay, he was told that the Princess had begged for an interview with Rana Bhim Singh in order to bid him a last farewell. Allauddin, being now sufficiently confident of success, granted the request, and gave the Rana permission to enter Padmini's litter. The interview was to last half an hour. The Rana entered a litter, which was at once borne off unobserved to Chitor while the others remained at Delhi. Allauddin waited for half an hour, but the interview, as he thought, still continued. An hour passed. Allauddin fretted and fumed, for there was no sign that the Rana and Princess were any nearer to the final parting. He grew suspicious at last and rushed to the litter, only to find that he had been outwitted by a woman, and the Rana had escaped. The pursuit began at once, but the Rajput warriors and the litter-bearers promptly threw off all concealment and fought desperately to gain time until not one of them remained alive.

Meanwhile the Rana was making good his escape on a fleet-footed horse. In the end, however, his pursuers gained upon him and almost overtook him in the last few strides ; with not a moment to spare he reached the shelter of his fortress, and the massive gate closed with a crash right in the faces of the Sultan's men. They returned to their master, who, in a frenzy of rage and disappointment once more laid siege to

Chitor. A furious battle was fought, with dreadful losses on both sides. Among the Rajputs, who showed incredible valour that day, Padmini's uncle, Gorah, was slain. His wife praised him and, like a true Rajput lady, rejoiced to hear from Badul that he had not fallen without reaping a goodly harvest of the Sultan's men. Then, as was the custom with the Rajput women, she sprang into the flames, saying 'My lord will chide my delay.' Allauddin retreated with the remnant of his forces.

Years passed, yet the beautiful moonlike face of Padmini was constantly before the Sultan's eyes. He could not rest without making yet another attempt to capture her, and the attack on the historic city was at length renewed. The Rajputs had not yet recovered from their losses in the previous struggle with the Sultan. Despite the most heroic efforts, they found themselves face to face with ultimate defeat. The Rana pondered anxiously the means by which he might avoid the complete destruction of the flower of his Rajputs. Eleven of his sons had perished on the battle-field, and only one son now remained. At last the Rana and his men put on the yellow robes which were the symbol of victory or death, and made a last desperate sortie against the Tartar host.

Padmini watched the battle from the battlements of the fortress. When at length she perceived that the Rajputs could not hope to



RANI PADMINI

They committed 'Johar', according to the ancient custom of their race.

withstand the overwhelming numbers of the Tartars, she exhorted her maidens to follow her and perish in the flames rather than live to be dishonoured by a cruel foe. 'Before a vile enemy enters Chitor,' she cried, 'treading on the corpses of our fallen heroes, this body shall be given to the flames. Those of you who will follow me, do so forthwith. If there is anybody who prizes her life above her Rajput honour, let her remain.' The Rajput women followed the example of their Princess. The funeral pyre was lighted within a vast underground retreat. The procession of women entered the cavern, and the opening closed upon them. Thus, with a noble disregard for life upon terms their proud spirits could not stoop to accept, they committed 'Johar' or self-immolation, according to the ancient custom of their race.

When Allauddin entered the fort a conqueror, his joy at the thought that the peerless Princess would now be his was soon changed into surprise, disappointment, and grief. It had never struck him that Padmini, when all hope was lost, would outwit him thus. When he found out that she and all the Rajput women had sacrificed their lives in the cruel flames, even his stony heart was moved. He ordered his men, who were destroying the fortress of Chitor, to spare the beautiful palace of Padmini, which to this day stands alone by the blue waters of the lake.

PUNNA BAI.

Rana Vikramajit, son of the great Rana Sangram Singh, ruled in Chitor in the sixteenth century. He was an insolent, passionate and vindictive man. He did not trouble to show any respect to his powerful nobles, who were rigid in exacting it even from their king. He passed his time with his soldiers and wrestlers, utterly indifferent to the administration of his kingdom. Bahadur Shah, who was then reigning in Guzerat, advanced on Chitor and besieged it. Fortunately, Vikramajit's step-mother, Rani Kurnavathi, begged the Mogul Emperor Humayun to intercede on her behalf and raise the siege. The Emperor, who was of a kindly disposition, went with a large force to the help of the beleaguered Rajputs and forced Bahadur Shah to retire from Chitor. Rana Vikramajit then continued his reign, free from any similar danger. He had not profited by his vicissitudes, but persisted in insolent behaviour. Once, in the open court, he struck an old Rajput warrior of high repute, a powerful vassal, named Keremchund of Ajmere, for some trivial offence. This act caused all the nobles to make common cause with one another, and depose the Rana. In his place they set up Bunbeer, the bastard son of Prithvi Raj, as king. Vikramajit was cast into prison to learn a little humility.

The rightful heir after Vikramajit was Udaya Singh, son of Rani Kurnavathi. This prince was very young, and as Chitor was already torn asunder by civil war, the nobles feared that the situation would become worse under the rule of a minor. That was the reason why Bunbeer was made king. When Rani Kurnavathi died, she entrusted her son, Udaya Singh, to the maternal care of Punna, a very loyal Rajput woman. 'Punna' means a diamond, an apt name in this instance, for its bearer possessed very precious qualities. Punna promised that she would protect the Prince even at the cost of her own life or the lives of those dearest to her.

She also had a son of the same age as Udaya Singh, so she brought up the Prince along with her own son. Udaya Singh grew strong and handsome. Punna used to sing to him the ballads of Rajput bravery and the valorous deeds of the heroes of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*.

One day, while she was thus devotedly fulfilling the charge which had been entrusted to her, a servant entered with horror depicted on his face and told her that Rana Vikramajit had been assassinated. Punna was stunned by the news for a while. She knew that Bunbeer, like all upstarts, feared that, though the nobles had raised him to the throne, he could not enjoy complete safety while the rightful Rana still lived. As Udaya Singh was the next heir, Punna thought that Bunbeer would try to remove him

PUNNA BAI

When Rani Kurnavathi died, she entrusted her son Udaya Singh to Punna.

also from his path. In an instant she had framed a courageous plan. She dressed her son in the Prince's clothing, telling him that he was to play at being the Prince that day, and lulled him to sleep in the Prince's bed. Then she told Udaya Singh that they would very soon be going on a journey to see some wonderful sights. Taking him in her arms, she went with a faithful servant to a dark part of the house, where she placed the Prince in a large fruit-basket and told him to be careful not to make the least noise. Then she covered him with leaves and told the servant to carry the basket to a place outside the fort, where she promised to join him soon.

Punna then returned to her chamber, where her child was sleeping in the Prince's bed. A few minutes later she heard the creaking of the door, and presently Bunbeer entered with a dagger in his hand. His very presence made Punna tremble with fear. He asked her in a threatening tone where Prince Udaya Singh was. Punna's voice was choked with grief and terror, and she could not speak. She merely pointed to the bed where her own son lay. The heartless wretch immediately approached the bed, and stood for a moment to satisfy himself that it really was the Prince. His doubts as to his identity were removed when he beheld the rich robes, the jewelled cap and the silken bed. He promptly plunged his dagger in the bosom of the innocent child, and returned to his palace, happy

in the belief that his only rival could trouble him no more.

As soon as he had left the room, Punna, who had looked with horror on the fate of her child, rushed towards the bed, pressed the little boy to her bosom, and wept aloud. Though she had foreseen everything and done her duty unflinchingly, she could no longer control the natural emotions of a mother. Hearing her cries, the waiting women hurried to the place and joined in the general mourning. Nobody but Punna knew that the Prince was safe beyond the reach of the cruel murderer. They all thought that the last descendant of the great Rana Sangram Singh was dead, and the remains of the murdered child were burnt with all princely honours. When she had shed many tears over the ashes of her little son, Punna hastened to join the servant and secure the safety of Udaya Singh.

The faithful servant was eagerly awiting the nurse in a river-bed some miles west of Chitor. Fortunately the Prince was sleeping and had escaped notice entirely. They took the boy to Deola, where Singh Rao was ruling. Punna begged the Raja to take the young Prince under his protection, explaining to him that Udaya Singh was the only representative of the great Rana Sangram Singh's line; but the Rao feared to undertake the perilous charge, as he dreaded the consequences of detection. Punna set forth

once more and at last reached Dongerpur. The ruler Rawul Aiskurn, being informed of her mission, expressed his own willingness to afford shelter to the Prince, but pleaded the danger which threatened himself and the child in case of discovery.

Punna, though thoroughly exhausted and disappointed, would not be baffled by these obstacles. She was not made of such base metal as the Rao and Rawul; she was a woman who had sacrificed her dear one's life for the sake of her Prince. Constancy and fidelity were of greater importance to her than her life or that of her child. She continued her journey by a circuitous route, crossing the intricate valleys of the Aravalli with the help of the wild tribes of that region, the Bhils. At last she reached Komulmere, where the course she took was both courageous and wise. She demanded an immediate interview with the Governor of the place, whose name was Assa Sah. He belonged to the mercantile class, and he was a Jain, and therefore humane by disposition. When the interview was granted, Punna placed the young Prince in the Governor's lap and bade him protect the life of his sovereign. She then narrated to him all the circumstances that had led to her journey, not omitting her sacrifice of her own child to save the life of the Prince.

The chieftain felt greatly perplexed and alarmed. He was about to plead his inability to

accept the risks of the situation, when his mother, who was present, censured him for his fears and said, 'Fidelity never considers dangers or difficulties. He is your rightful lord, the son of the great Sangram Singh, and by God's blessing, the outcome will be glorious.' Filled with shame at having been ready to shirk his responsibility, and inspired by the noble and truthful words of his brave mother, the Governor resolved to take charge of the young Prince, and in order to satisfy any curiosity, gave out that the child was his nephew.

Punna left the district, as her presence there would have created suspicion. But as the Prince grew up, his commanding appearance and majestic bearing caused doubts to rise in the minds of many other chieftains. The rumour spread even to Chitor, where the nobles had grown restive under the rule of the upstart Bunbeer, who had begun to flout and even ill-treat the men to whom he owed his throne. At last the nobles and the feudatory chiefs went to Komulmere to see Udaya Singh, and the Prince's identity was revealed and proved by the noble-minded Punna, who lived to see the reward of her devotion when he was brought back to Chitor and duly enthroned as the Rana.

RANI DURGAVATHI

In the heart of the Deccan mountains there lay a small kingdom named Gondwana, where a hardy Rajput tribe prospered under the rule of Raja Dalpat Shah, a warrior of great renown. His consort was Rani Durgavathi, herself the daughter of a great Rajput chieftain. She was a woman of remarkable bravery, devoted to her country and its people. Gondwana was an independent kingdom, and the Rajput prince had never bowed down to any alien ruler. Raja Dalpat ruled the country wisely and justly like Manu of old. The people were quite contented, and pursued their various callings undisturbed by injustice or exaction. Unfortunately, the good Dalpat Shah died before his time, leaving his wife Durgavathi a young widow with an only son, Veeranarayan. For the sake of her son and country Durgavathi did not commit Sati, but devoted every effort to carry on efficiently the administration of the country, true to the traditions of her family. The capital of Gondwana was the flourishing city of Garh.

The period was the middle of the sixteenth century. The throne of Delhi was occupied by the Mogul Emperor, Akbar, who was then launching his campaigns of conquest and annexation. The independent principality of Gondwana with its woman ruler did not escape his eye. His Viceroy,

Asaf Khan, was no less ambitious, and he too set his heart on the subjugation of Gondwana.

The news of the impending Mogul invasion reached Garh and spread like wildfire through the city. The peaceful Rajput citizens were greatly alarmed. They had never expected to hear such news, as they themselves had lived within their own borders, doing their neighbours no injury. Their numbers made it hopeless for them to attempt to defy the Moguls. Yet Rani Durgavathi and her people had no thought of submitting without a blow. While the heroic blood of her race flowed in the Rani's veins, she would never bow her head to the bloodthirsty invaders. Whatever the consequences might be, she would strike a blow at the Moguls and put her trust in the valour of her people. Her summons to arms roused the courage and determination of all her subjects. Every adult who could fight answered his country's call, and in a short time the little city was able to put a fully equipped army in the field. Even the women and children displayed the greatest enthusiasm. The Rani placed herself at the head of her army and awaited the Mogul hosts. They were all now actuated by a single idea, and that was to repel the unjustified attack upon their home and liberties. Every man was thirsting to prove his valour.

Asaf Khan, who led the expedition against the city, expected that the little principality, ruled by a woman, would be taken very easily

without striking even a blow. What was his surprise when he found the city prepared to offer a stern resistance! He had brought with him only a small force, and he realized that it was not strong enough to take the city. He therefore sent for reinforcements from Delhi, and in the meantime despatched a messenger to the palace to ask for an interview with the Rani. When this was granted, the messenger bowed to her respectfully and said, 'O noble Queen, I come from Asaf Khan, the Viceroy of the great Mogul Emperor, Akbar. We do not wish to wage war with you. Asaf Khan assures you through me that he will retire with his forces provided you consign your son to the care of our august Emperor, and acknowledge Mogul supremacy.'

Before he had concluded his speech, Durgavathi, filled with rage, rose up from her seat, stretched out her right hand, and proudly replied: 'Let not your Viceroy think that we can be terrified by the mere sight of his soldiers. Tell him that we do not care to bandy words, but long to meet him in yonder plains. Let the event decide whether we are to be independent or to accept the supremacy of your sovereign!' With these words she dismissed the messenger.

When Asaf Khan heard this reply, his astonishment was great. He had never supposed that the Rani with a handful of men would have the courage to defy the power of the Moguls. As soon as he had received fresh reinforcements, he

advanced upon the city. The Rajput army, with the Rani herself in command, came out to meet him, and thus the two forces stood facing each other in full battle array. The Rani, with armour of polished steel, a helmet flashing on her head, and a long sword in her hand, could be seen awaiting the onset, seated on a white charger. Asaf Khan could not but admire her astonishing bravery. Soon the battle began, and the infantry and cavalry of both sides were locked in deadly combat. The Rani herself plunged into the fight, wielding her massive sword, and slew numbers of the Moguls in quick succession. While it encouraged her men, her presence struck terror into the hearts of the Moguls. 'Advance, advance, my gallant men,' they heard her cry. 'Fight for your honour and your country.' The Rajput infantry fought heroically and beat off the Mogul attacks, while the cavalry broke the enemy's ranks and put them to the sword. Before very long the Rajput victory was complete and the Mogul army left the battlefield in utter confusion. Removing her helmet and coat of mail, the Rani then offered thanks to the Goddess Durga for giving her success, and withdrew to her palace.

Asaf Khan was not the man to brook defeat at the hands of a woman. He burned to avenge the defeat his troops had sustained and the consequent damage to his reputation. Mustering a larger army, he once more presented himself

before Durgavathi's city. The Rani had already anticipated the attack, and she gathered her men and advanced to meet the foe. This time the struggle was more severe than before. For a whole day the battle raged, both sides showing the bitterest determination. At last the Mogul host had to admit defeat a second time, and Asaf Khan fell back into Mogul territory, thoroughly humiliated.

But alas! Treachery was to achieve what force of arms could not obtain. Soon after the repulse of the second invasion, when the whole city was illuminated, and the people were taking part in the general rejoicings, the Rani distributed rewards to all those who had distinguished themselves in the campaign. She made her son, Prince Veeranarayan, Captain-General of the forces. This made some of the veteran commanders jealous of the Prince and caused them to accuse the Queen of partiality. Selfishness and envy overcame their sense of honour and patriotism, and they secretly opened negotiations with the Moguls. Asaf Khan was delighted with the turn events had taken. He promptly seized the opportunity and hastened to the scene of his former defeats. This time a breach was effected in the walls of the fort, and the Mogul forces were admitted into the city.

When the sentry sounded the alarm, the Queen put on her coat of mail, and divided the army into two parts, one commanded by herself,

RANI DURGAVATHI

The Queen put on her coat of mail.

the other by her son. The struggle was terrible, but as the Rajputs had been taken off their guard, they were at a great disadvantage. Desperately as they resisted, their ranks grew thinner and thinner. Though many of her faithful followers tried to convince the Rani of the futility of continuing the contest against such odds, she refused to submit. She fought like a tigress, her sword laying a circle of corpses at her feet, till suddenly the Prince received a mortal wound from a Mogul soldier. Frantic with rage and sorrow, heedless of the consequences, his mother rushed headlong into the midst of the enemy, striking down all who stood before her; but even as she drove them back, an arrow fell and pierced her eye, and while she was attempting to pluck the shaft away, a Mogul soldier ran his spear right through her heart. Thus perished Rani Durgavathi, the heroic Queen of Gondwana, falling in the attempt to save the honour of her Rajput race and to preserve the independence of her country.

CHAND BIBI SULTANA

Chand Bibi Sultana, the daughter of Sultan Hussain Nizam Shah, the ruler of Ahmednagar in the Deccan, was born in 1548 A.D. From her earliest years she was taught to follow the principles of piety and truth. As Chand's mother had died soon after giving birth to the child, the Sultan found his chief consolation in the society of his daughter, who bore a great resemblance to her mother. The girl was constantly in her father's company, and this gave her the opportunity of learning how the business of government was conducted. Chand was remarkably beautiful. Her tall, comely, and stately figure, her sparkling eyes and fair complexion, brought many suitors to seek her hand in marriage. For political reasons the Nizam Shah married her to Ali Adil Shah, the young Sultan of Bijapur. There were great rejoicings, for it was believed that the marriage would bring local quarrels to an end, and allow both states to present a united front to the onslaughts of the Moguls.

Ali Adil Shah loved his wife dearly and was a devoted husband. Her sterling qualities and her remarkable tact brought about numerous reforms in the administration of his realm. The nobles ceased to waste their time and substance in petty quarrels. Money which had

hitherto been spent on gambling and hunting was now utilized for worthy public purposes. Regular prayers were offered in the mosques, and alms were distributed to the poor. Justice was administered promptly and impartially. Unfortunately this new prosperity was not to endure very long. Ali Adil Shah died suddenly in 1580 A.D., leaving Chand a childless widow. Since there was no strong hand to curb the power of the nobles, they now openly engaged in civil warfare.

Chand controlled the situation for a time, however, by setting up a regency on behalf of Ibrahim, a nephew of the late Sultan. Meanwhile the neighbouring states of Golkonda, Bidar, and others, taking advantage of this internal confusion, invaded Bijapur. In the hope of restoring order in her city, Chand Bibi appealed to the valour and patriotism of her subjects, and exhorted them to forget their quarrels, unite together, and oppose their common foes. She warned them that, if they continued their feuds, the other kingdoms would take advantage of them and annex Bijapur to their own territories, destroying that independence which was dearer than anything else on earth.

Chand Bibi's appeal produced a marvellous effect. All classes of her people joined hands, unmindful of their late rivalry, and fought gallantly under the standard of their Regent.

Proving once more the truth of the saying that 'Union is strength,' the people of Bijapur drove back the invaders, who fled helter-skelter in all directions. When the common danger was over, however, the old order of things asserted itself once more. Civil war destroyed the unity of the kingdom, and a condition of anarchy began to prevail. Meanwhile, the young Sultan Ibrahim Shah, who had now come of age, listening to evil counsels, declared himself free from the control of the Regent. With tears in her eyes, Chand Bibi left Bijapur for Ahmednagar, the land of her birth.

But even in her old home misfortune dogged her steps, and she was not permitted to enjoy the repose for which she craved. In Ahmednagar also civil war was causing untold misery. On the death of Sultan Hussain Shah, his son Murteza had come to the throne. Not long afterwards he was assassinated, and the affairs of the realm fell into utter confusion. For a time the situation improved under Prince Burhan, another son of Hussain, but he too died after only a short reign. When his infant son Ibrahim was proclaimed Sultan, the situation grew even worse, the boy himself being slain in the course of a civil war. Chand Bibi could not remain passive while the kingdom was rushing hourly to disaster. She took the opportunity of raising a minor representative of the royal family to the throne, and herself assumed the

duties of Regent. She discharged her arduous task with the utmost ability and resolution, showing such skill in handling all the details of the administration that in a short time she had brought order out of chaos. The people grew contented under her rule, and all might have gone well but for the jealousy of certain nobles who were the leaders of a rival faction, resentful of the power of Chand Bibi. These nobles were treacherous enough to invite the Mogul Emperor Akbar to intervene.

Akbar had long been contemplating the extension of his empire to the Deccan, and watching the progress of events in the Deccan Sultanates. When the invitation reached him, he readily consented, and made preparations for a large army to proceed south. The troops of Delhi marched like a swarm of locusts on Ahmednagar, under the leadership of Prince Murad.

On hearing of the advance of the Mogul army on Ahmednagar, Chand Bibi showed herself equal to the occasion. Great as her abilities were in peace, she was equally competent to carry on a war. She first tried and put to death the traitors in her camp; then she made preparations for the defence of the city, and appealed to all the disaffected nobles to support the common cause of maintaining the liberty of their beloved city. She sent a request to the State of Bijapur for help in repelling the Moguls. She amassed

CHAND BIBI SULTANA

She was everywhere in the hottest of the fighting, cheering on her men.

great supplies of grain inside the fort for the use of the defenders in the event of a siege. Lastly she sent Prince Murad a message saying that she and her followers would welcome him if he came as a friend, but in the event of war they would fight till every one of them was put to death, and would not surrender the city so long as life remained in their bodies. But Murad had set his heart on obeying the behests of Akbar and capturing Ahmednagar, and he would not yield to the threats of a woman. He and his mighty host marched on and laid siege to the city.

How did Chand Bibi behave during the siege? Woman as she was, she might have remained in the security of her own apartments, had she not been as fearless and resolute in war as in peace. She donned her armour, and, with sword in hand, personally inspected the defences, and gave advice and encouragement to those who manned them. Showing extraordinary daring and resource in the science of defence, she detected and thwarted all the mines laid by the enemy. She was everywhere in the hottest of the fighting, cheering on her men, exposing herself to the same risks as they did as she moved from place to place to help and hearten them in the struggle. Her soldiers became infused with the same heroic spirit. If any breach was made in the walls, it was immediately repaired by the defenders. Her Arab marksmen were deadly shots, and they harassed the Moguls most cruelly.

Murad, who had at first thought lightly of the Sultana as a mere woman, was struck mute with wonder at her bravery and skill. Her leadership surpassed that of a veteran general. Meanwhile his own men were feeling the pinch of hunger, and many had perished in the battle. At last, after a tremendous effort, the Moguls succeeded in laying a mine and effecting a breach in a small portion of the wall. The defenders fell back in momentary panic and were on the point of retreating when Chand Bibi rushed to the spot. Fully alive to the danger of the situation, but in no way daunted, she addressed her men in her usual commanding tones: 'O valiant soldiers and brothers in the faith, nobly have you fought for all these days! After sacrificing so much blood and treasure are we now to yield to our foes? Fortune is fickle; change of fortune is the lot of man. To-day we may be defeated; to-morrow success will attend our arms. Remember the days of the great Sultans Nizam Shah and Adil Shah, who never yielded even when all seemed lost. Life without honour and patriotism is nothing. Who among you can be so base as to surrender to our foes and become their slaves? Whatever may be your answer, I know my own. Though all desert me, I, a woman, will never yield to the Moguls. Let them, if they can, enter this our ancient city, but ere they do so, they must tread on my mortal remains.'. So saying, the heroic woman rushed upon the foe like the

terrible Kali, and her sword reaped a dreadful harvest of men. Fired by her indignant words, her men attacked the Moguls simultaneously with fresh courage and vigour, and repelled the advancing column. Ahmednagar was saved. Murad's admiration for the Sultana knew no bounds. After holding a brief council, he came to the conclusion that so long as Chand Bibi was there to inspire her men, Ahmednagar could not be taken, and he sent her a flag of truce. For her part Chand Bibi knew well that, in spite of the resistance offered by herself and her heroic followers, they could not hold out against the vast Mogul army any longer. Their strength was well-nigh exhausted. She therefore accepted the truce, and opened negotiations for an honourable treaty of peace.

Meanwhile treachery was once more at work in Ahmednagar. Another invitation reached the Moguls from a few disaffected nobles, and this time Akbar himself came from Delhi and directed the operations. The Deccan Sultanates under the leadership of Chand Sultana again offered a stout resistance. Chand Bibi herself organized the defence and joined in hand-to-hand conflict with desperate courage and determination. It is said that when all other supplies were exhausted, she loaded her guns with gold and silver coins. The Emperor Akbar watched her feats of arms with astonishment. Never had he known a warrior, and what was more amazing, a

woman, of such bravery and tenacity of purpose. At length he decided that nothing could be gained by continuing the fight, while it would be an honour to secure the friendship of such a woman. He saluted the Sultana and expressed his desire to end the war. Chand Bibi was weary of the struggle and anxious to spare her people any further suffering. So she accepted the truce and retired to her apartments. This proved, unhappily, to be a dire mistake. Her soldiers did not clearly understand the situation, and on being ordered to retire at the moment when they fancied victory to be within their grasp, they were filled with anger and suspicion. The jealous nobles took advantage of the situation to spread the rumour that the Regent had betrayed their country to the Moguls, and accepted a shameful truce. The deluded men immediately rushed into the apartments of Chand Bibi and slew their noble leader where she stood. Such was the tragic end of Chand Bibi Sultana, whose valorous deeds have won her immortality, and endeared her to the hearts of all succeeding generations.

THARA BAI

THARA BAI cannot be called a heroine in the sense in which we have applied the term to those women whose lives and deeds were inspired by noble aims and unselfish interests. To many readers she will appear a somewhat sinister figure, determined to secure power for herself or her son by any means, however cruel and unscrupulous. Nevertheless she claims our attention as one of the most tenacious, intrepid, capable, and resourceful of the women who have made themselves prominent in Indian History.

Thara Bai was the daughter of Hambir Rao Mohite, a gallant Maratha warrior, and was married to Rajaram, the second son of Shivaji. Besides Thara Bai, Rajaram had married other wives—Janaki Bai, who had died and Rajas Bai and Ambika Bai, who were living at the time of Thara Bai's marriage. A few years later, Thara Bai gave birth to a son who was named Shivaji after his glorious grandfather. It was about this time that the Marathas, who had been fighting with the Moguls under Aurangzebe encountered defeat, and Rajaram was forced to flee to Jinji in South India. When in due course he sent for his queens, Thara Bai and the others reached Jinji by sea by doubling the Konkan coast and landing near Pondicherry. Rajas Bai had a son named

Sambhaji in 1693, and Ambika Bai a daughter who died very young. Soon after, Jinji also was besieged, but the Moguls were unable to take it. Rajaram then assumed the offensive, escaped to the Maharashtra, and began to harass the Moguls; but long campaigns and constant exposure shattered his constitution, and he died in 1700.

Rajaram was the Regent, for the legal heir, Sahu, was with the Moguls. At the time of his death, Rajaram had two sons, Shivaji, the son of Thara Bai, and Sambhaji, the son of Rajas Bai. These were all at Panhala. Ambika Bai had committed *Sati,* but Thara Bai, the chief queen of Rajaram, acted in a very different manner. She asked the courtiers to recognize her son Shivaji as king. Some of the nobles protested that Sahu was their rightful king; as he was a prisoner at Delhi, she could be his Regent, but could not place her son on the throne. The high-spirited woman retorted to this by imprisoning all those who opposed her wishes, and the other courtiers hastened to carry out her policy. Early in 1701 Shivaji was crowned with much splendour and married to Bhavani Bai, and at the same time Thara Bai took the precaution of throwing Rajas Bai and her son Sambhaji into prison.

Then she continued the war with the Moguls. She had inherited the military talents and energy of her father, Hambir Rao Mohite. With tireless vigour, she flew from camp to camp and from fortress to fortress, living the life of a common

soldier, exposed to the scorching sun by day, sleeping on the ground by night. Thara Bai seemed to be everywhere, inspiring her officers and planning fresh campaigns. Her unerring judgment and clear insight won the respect and admiration of the Marathas. Aurangzebe, who had not expected to meet with so vigorous a resistance from a woman, resolved to adopt other devices. He caused Sahu to write to various Maratha leaders, calling on them to submit to him, for the wily Emperor hoped by this means to create divisions in the Maratha camp. Then Sahu himself was sent to the Maratha dominions to bring the Marathas to submission. Thara Bai had the utmost difficulty in maintaining her son's cause, for Shivaji was a dull weakling. Rajas Bai had also contrived to advance the claims of her son, Sambhaji. There was thus every possibility of civil war, and people were for that reason inclined to prefer the rule of Sahu. One by one, Thara Bai's friends deserted her to uphold Sahu's cause. Nothing daunted, she contrived a counter-stroke by proclaiming that Sahu was an impostor: the real Sahu, she said, had died long ago. Then she commanded her men to swear on milk and boiled rice—a form of oath considered very binding—to observe fidelity to her son against all claimants. Only a few of them took the oath, while the others promised to do so only if Sahu was proved to be an impostor.

THARA BAI

She commanded her men to swear on milk and boiled rice.

Meanwhile Sahu was marching towards Maharashtra, gaining more and more adherents. Many Maratha leaders swore allegiance to him. He captured fort after fort and at last led his troops against Panhala. Thara Bai fled from there to Rangna. After capturing Panhala, Sahu proceeded to Rangna, but he could not take it, as the place was well defended; so he raised the siege and retired. This so much encouraged Thara Bai that she now marched with an army to recapture Panhala, and was able to bribe the commandant of the fort to surrender it to her. Her next step was the establishment of Kolhapur as the capital of the Maratha kingdom, after which she sent agents everywhere to corrupt the loyalty of the Maratha chiefs who had thrown in their lot with Sahu, urging them to make themselves independent or even join the Moguls rather than serve under the banner of a proclaimed impostor. Many Maratha chieftains acted upon her suggestion and either became independent or were attracted to the Mogul cause by the prospect of material rewards. In this way, by the end of 1710 A.D., Sahu's cause, which had seemed so prosperous two years ago, was given a severe setback. His territory was reduced to the area round Satara and a few hill-forts garrisoned by loyal officers.

A small event now turned the tide of Thara Bai's fortunes. The famous Shanker Narayan, a hero who commanded universal respect, had

hitherto been her staunch supporter, accepting her word that Sahu was an impostor. When he became convinced that this was not the case, he withdrew his allegiance. Sahu's chief adviser, a cunning Brahmin named Balaji Viswanath, now 'turned against Thara Bai her own armoury of intrigue.' As long as she was in Kolhapur, Balaji Viswanath knew that Sahu's power could not be restored. He therefore sent a message to Rajaram's younger widow, Rajas Bai, promising Sahu's support if she overthrew Thara Bai and set her own son Sambhaji in the place of the imbecile Shivaji. Rajas Bai, who was also an ambitious woman, eagerly accepted the offer, and in 1712 A.D., with the aid of some Kolhapur nobles, she bribed the garrison of Panhala, overthrew Thara Bai's authority, and flung Shivaji and his mother into prison. Then she had her own son Sambhaji raised to the throne.

Rajas Bai and Sambhaji were not suffered to enjoy their new position for long. Sahu's agents marched against them and took them by surprise. While Sambhaji fled away with some followers, Rajas Bai and Thara Bai both fell into the hands of Sahu's supporters and were sent to Sahu himself at Satara. Being of a generous nature, Sahu received the two rival mothers respectfully and made preparations to send them to Panhala, where he desired to keep them in honourable confinement. Thara Bai, however, hated her rival so much that she would not even share the same

gilded prison, but expressed her wish to remain in Satara itself. Sahu consented to keep her with him, and had an old palace prepared for her reception in Satara fort, where she lived until Sahu's death.

When Sahu died, Thara Bai again came to the front. Sahu himself had no children. He did not like Sambhaji, son of Rajas Bai, and death had removed his rival Shivaji, son of Thara Bai. Sahu's wife, Sakwar Bai, was a woman of violent temper who strove to force Sahu to adopt a creature of her own. She hated Balaji Viswanath, the Peshwa, and pressed Sahu to dismiss him. Just when Sahu was about to give way in the matter of adoption, her plans were thwarted by Thara Bai, grown even more ambitious with advancing years, who sought an interview with the dying man and reproved him for consenting to allow a stranger to ascend the gadi while there was still a claimant living. Sahu, who was not aware of any living heir to the throne other than Sambhaji, was greatly astonished and asked her who it could be. She replied that Shivaji's wife, Bhawani Bai, had given birth to a son after the death of her husband. In order to save the child from the jealousy of Rajas Bai, she had given him a large dose of opium, and when he fell into a death-like sleep, had contrived to place him in the care of a worthy Rajput couple. She had then circulated a story of the baby's death and held its funeral; but all she had buried were

two fowls. This boy, Ram Raja, she said, was still alive.

Though Sahu felt great regard for Thara Bai, he could hardly believe her story after so many years, and he asked her whether she had any witnesses to prove her statement. Thara Bai, who never did anything by halves, was able to produce the two Rajputs, and they declared that her story was perfectly true. Sahu was delighted, and resolved to appoint Ram Raja his successor.

Sakwar Bai, who had all along cherished the hope of adopting a weak young man and keeping all power in her own hands, was furious when she heard how all her schemes had been upset. She flew into a rage and denounced Ram Raja as an impostor, declaring that Sahu's credulity had been imposed upon. Sahu, however, gave the Peshwa Balaji private instructions that no one but Ram Raja should succeed him on the throne, and ordered him to surround the palace with armed soldiers as soon as he passed away, in case Sakwar Bai or Sambhaji should make any attempt to thwart Ram Raja's accession. Having thus settled his earthly affairs, King Sahu passed away, uttering the words 'Hara, Hara, Shiva.'

Immediately after the death of Sahu, the Peshwa sent an escort to bring Ram Raja to the palace and place him on the throne, while Sakwar Bai was forced to ascend her husband's funeral pyre. Balaji Viswanath now resolved to make himself the real master of the realm. Accordingly

he suggested that Ram Raja, who was an inexperienced youth, should allow the Peshwa and Thara Bai to conduct the administration; in return Ram Raja would be given a yearly revenue of sixty-five lakhs of rupees, and full freedom of movement in the town of Satara.

Ram Raja offered no objection to this, but when Thara Bai came to know of these proceedings, her rage exceeded all bounds. She was well aware that Balaji had merely used her name as a tool in order to realize his own ambition. She had hoped that when her grandson was made king, her own ascendancy over him would be complete, but now all her hopes had been dashed to the ground. It was not long before she thought of a counterstroke against Balaji. She suddenly expressed a desire to go to the fort of Sinhagad, and there spend the remainder of her days near Rajaram's grave, and two months after the coronation of Ram Raja the wily old Queen made the journey to the fort. She soon prevailed upon the governor of Sinhagad, a gallant soldier named Chimnaji, to join her in overthrowing the Peshwa and rescuing the young prince from his domination. Balaji had already suspected the old Queen's motive in moving to Sinhagad, and when he heard of the conspiracy he made up his mind to nip it in the bud. He summoned the Queen and Chimnaji to appear before him at once, warning them of the consequences which would follow any refusal. Terrified at the discovery of

their plans, they reluctantly complied. In order to separate Thara Bai from her confederate, the Peshwa treated her with the utmost respect and presented her with *nuzzur* or tribute, after which she was escorted back to her old dwelling at Satara. Chimnaji, on the other hand, was imprisoned as soon as he arrived.

Thara Bai let it be thought that she had accepted defeat, but in reality she was planning what to do next to regain her power. At last she decided to seize the person of Ram Raja himself and then rally all the nobles against the Peshwa in his name. In this way she thought she could make herself mistress of Maharashtra. She laid her plans with the greatest skill. Her first step was to obtain permission to enter the fort of Satara under the pretence of visiting the temple of Shiva, which was close at hand. Once there, she swiftly collected provisions and munitions, bribed the commandant and other officers, and eagerly awaited the return of Ram Raja to Satara from his successful military campaigns. When he came back, Thara Bai sent a message asking him to come and give his grandmother the pleasure of his company for a day. Not suspecting any treachery, he entered the fort and was fondly welcomed by Thara Bai. He drank and feasted while he listened to the affectionate words she lavished on him. At last he rose and, after bidding her good-bye, mounted his horse and made his way to the outer gate. He was

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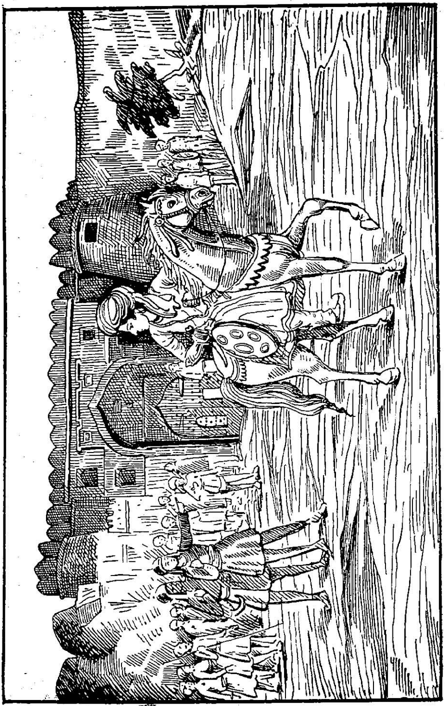

THARA BAI

He ordered them to open the gate, but they refused to do so.

astonished to find it locked and the whole court swarming with the old Queen's soldiers. He ordered them to open the gate, but they refused to do so, saying that the Queen's orders were peremptory. So he returned to demand an explanation from Thara Bai. But by this time the corridors were full of soldiers armed to the teeth, who disarmed him and threw him into a dungeon from which he never emerged alive. Thara Bai kept her grandson a captive as long as she lived, and by the time of her death the power of the Peshwa was so well established that nobody gave a thought to the unfortunate prince in the dungeon.

AHALYA BAI

OUR stories have hitherto been confined to the lives of women who distinguished themselves by the martial prowess and enterprise which they displayed in their struggles against their various enemies, their personal foes as well as those of their country. In the story which follows we deal with the life of a Queen who was equal in greatness to any of these, but whose fame rests, not on her exploits in the field, but on the achievements of a peaceful reign. Milton's saying that 'Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war,' is admirably illustrated in the life of Ahalya Bai.

Ahalya Bai was born of a humble but respectable family. Her father was Ananda Rao Scindia, a farmer, connected with the great Scindia family. For a long time he and his wife were not blessed with children, but at last their quiet home life was brightened by the birth of a daughter in 1735. The child was named Ahalya Bai after the great Ahalyadevi, the consort of Gauthama Rishi, one of the seven great sages whom we see in the constellation otherwise known as the Great Bear, in the northern part of the firmament.

Ahalya Bai was fair in complexion, and possessed all the graces befitting a Hindu girl. By nature she was gentle and kind, and the

principles of charity and devotion which she gathered from the stories told her by her parents took deep root in her heart. This early training was undoubtedly the inspiration of the philanthropic activities of her later life.

The story of her marriage is very romantic. Malhar Rao Holkar, the Maratha chieftain, happened to halt at the village in which Ahalya Bai lived. The girl, who was then only nine years old, went out to see the imposing array of the great leader and his men. Fascinated by the simplicity and innocence of the girl, the Holkar took her in his arms, and caressed her with every mark of parental affection. Learning from a villager that she was the daughter of a respectable man belonging to the Scindia family, he sent for Ananda Rao and told him that he intended Ahalya to be the bride of his own son. It is not difficult to imagine what happiness the poor farmer would have felt on hearing that his daughter was to become the wedded wife of the heir-apparent to a powerful chieftain. Ananda Rao could only thank the Holkar profusely for the great honour which had thus been shown him, and the marriage took place soon after, amid general rejoicings and with the traditional splendour of the East.

Ahalya Bai went to her husband's home, where she proved the best of wives and an exemplary daughter-in-law. Her position was not always easy, for Malhar Rao used often to lose his temper and behave with savage ferocity.

AHALYA BAI

The girl, who was then only nine years old, went out to see the imposing array of the great leader and his men.

Even a very trivial mistake would lead to a storm of anger. However, Ahalya Bai's gentle words and calm reasoning gradually tamed the fiery spirit of the hero, who showed her more affection than ever. At home she not only supervised the domestics in their work but gave them very effective assistance. It is not uncommon in this world for people of low position to become extremely proud and haughty on finding themselves suddenly raised to an exalted station. This was not the case with Ahalya. She lived her old simple and regular life, showing no desire for the ease and luxury which she could command.

Fate, however, dealt Ahalya Bai a heavy blow when her beloved husband died on a military campaign, and she became a widow after scarcely nine years of married life. True to the old tradition she made up her mind to ascend the funeral pyre with her husband and commit Sati, but the old Holkar with tears in his eyes implored her not to do so. 'O daughter!' he said, 'I have lost my only son. You are the only solace left to me. If you too go from me, my heart will break.' Ahalya's resolution was shaken when she heard the once great chieftain, now a decrepit old man, begging her to stay with him to give him help and comfort, and in the end she decided that her duty was to the living rather than to the dead.

From that time Ahalya Bai assisted the Holkar in carrying on the administration of the state. When he went to take part in the battle

of Panipat in 1761, she was left to rule the country as Regent. On his return, he found that Ahalya's rule had been so efficient that his absence had caused no difficulties whatever, and he praised her in the highest terms.

Malhar Rao died in 1769, and Ahalya's young son succeeded him as ruler. He was a foolish and reckless youth, who would not heed the wise counsels of his mother. He ruled his people with an iron hand, while his insolence roused the indignation of his courtiers. Fortunately for the state, death removed him from the throne at an early age.

Ahalya Bai now assumed the reins of Government herself, and received from the Peshwa a Sanad allowing her to rule the kingdom, as there was no near male heir to ascend the gadi. This step met with the opposition of the Peshwa's uncle, Ragunatha Rao, a jealous and narrow-minded man, who led an army to force her to resign in favour of his nominee. But the people stood by Ahalya Bai, whom they regarded as their goddess, and routed her adversaries so thoroughly that she ruled undisturbed for a period of thirty wonderful years. A British historian, Sir John Malcolm, has paid a glowing tribute to her administrative skill. 'The success of Ahalya Bai in the internal administration of her dominions was altogether wonderful. Indore, which she had raised from a village to a wealthy city, was always regarded by her with particular

consideration. The fond object of her life was to promote the prosperity of all around her. She has become, by general suffrage, the model of good government in Malwa. Her munificence was not limited to her own territories. The beast of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the river shared in her compassion.'

Charity is the greatest of all virtues to the Hindus. Ahalya Bai was charity incarnate. Her name itself is synonymous with munificence. All over India we find temples and rest-houses built by the noble lady. It is to her that we owe the Vishnu temple at Gaya and the great Visveswar temple at Benares. These and various other religious endowments cost her vast sums of money, but Malhar Rao had left a well-filled treasury. The poor were fed and clothed daily at the expense of the state. Beggars were unknown in her kingdom. She constructed a road to make communications easy in an almost inaccessible part of the Vindhyas. These beneficent acts won for her the love and loyalty of her whole people. To entertain even the slightest hostility towards her was considered a sacrilege. There was not the slightest disturbance or rebellion in the country during her reign, for no one was discontented with her administration of the realm. She did not surround herself with regal pomp and circumstance, but looked upon herself as the servant of her people, the thought of whose welfare guided all her actions. Her only care was for

the prosperity of the state and its inhabitants. It is difficult to find a fitting parallel to such a sovereign in the East or in the West. In piety and simplicity she may perhaps be compared to the Sultan Nasir-ud-din, in toleration and catholicity of views to Akbar, and in breadth of sympathy with every living creature to Asoka.

Sir John Malcolm quotes numerous incidents to show what deep regard Ahalya Bai had for the welfare of her subjects. She dealt justice impartially, and at the same time showed the tender feelings of a mother. Once, when a rich banker died without leaving any issue to succeed to his estate, the state annexed all his property according to the custom of the age ; but when his widow sought audience of the queen and laid her pitiable case before her, Ahalya Bai restored all her possessions to her. She prevented her tax-collectors from exercising undue severity in collecting the revenues. Her countless acts of kindness and humanity won for her the adoration of her people.

A study of her daily life reveals how simple, just, and pious she was. She rose at dawn, bathed, and then offered up her prayers to God, after which she gave alms to the poor and fed the hungry. Her own meals were frugal, and she took no animal food. She attended the durbar in the afternoon at two o'clock, and showed herself calm and sedate, patient in hearing all cases, and quick in the despatch of business. Her durbar went on

for four hours, and no arrears of business were allowed to accumulate. At six o'clock she used to retire to her religious meditations, which were followed by a very plain dinner. She then used to turn once more to matters of state in order to dispose of work of a confidential nature in consultation with her ministers. She was refined in taste and manners. Whether in public or in private, she was never known to lose her temper. Her anger was never shown save when it was her duty to denounce and punish the wicked. That duty done, her frown would vanish immediately, and her features regain their composure. Flattery she hated from the bottom of her heart. Her character has been correctly summed up by Malcolm in these words: 'A female without vanity, a bigot without intolerance. . . . In the most sober view that can be taken of her character, she certainly appears within her limited sphere to have been one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed.'

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